

On Russian Dative Reflexive Constructions: Accidental or Compositional?

Summary

It is argued that the meaning of Russian dative reflexive constructions, i.e. constructions of the type *Ivanu ne rabotaetsja* 'Ivan does not feel like working', is compositional. It is shown that the reflexive marker *-sja* in general signals reduced agentivity and/or increased patientivity of the subject. One of the possible particular construals of *-sja* is 'the subject's volitionality is decreased'. For reasons explained in the paper, purely "quantitative" reduction ('the subject is less willing to carry out the action, and/or has less inner resources necessary for the action') is improbable, which forces the speakers to look for other circumstances reducing the subject's responsibility for the action. This is an easy task, since, on the one hand, one may *always* believe that the subject's desires and/or inner resources are due to an external irrational force acting upon the subject, and, on the other hand, we tend to speak of such a force only where the action is indeed carried out, which attenuates the responsibility of the subject. As far as the subject in dative reflexive constructions stops to be the initial point in the relevant causal chain and becomes in some sense a beneficiary, the nominative-dative shift in its morphology is only the side effect of non-reflexive-to-reflexive transformation. Thus, both the meaning of dative reflexive constructions and their form turn out to be predictable from the general meaning of the reflexive marker *-sja*.

Key words:

Russian, dative reflexive constructions, the reflexive marker, agentivity, patientivity, volitionality, compositionality

Streszczenie

Rosyjskie celownikowe konstrukcje zwrotne: Przypadkowe czy kompozycyjne?

W artykule wykazuje się, że znaczenie celownikowej konstrukcji zwrotnej, jak np. *Ivanu ne rabotaetsja* 'Janowi się nie pracuje', jest kompozycyjne. Zademonstrowano, że na ogół wykładnik zwrotności *-sja* wskazuje na obniżoną agentywność i/lub na podwyższoną pacjentywność subiekta. Jedną z możliwych interpretacji *-sja* polega na tym, że obniżona jest wolitywność subiekta. Z powodów, które zostały szczegółowo wytłumaczone, ściśle „ilościowa” redukcja ('subiekt ma mniej chęci do wykonania czynności i/lub mniej resursów wewnętrznych') jest mało prawdopodobna, i to zmusza do szukania innych okoliczności zmniejszających odpowiedzialność subiekta. Znalezienie tych okoliczności jest łatwe, ponieważ z jednej strony zawsze możemy uważać, iż chęci i/lub restryksje wewnętrzne subiekta istnieją dzięki działaniu na tego ostatniego zewnętrznej irracjonalnej siły, z innej zaś strony wyobrażamy sobie taką siłę przeważnie wtedy, gdy czynność zostaje rzeczywiście wykonana, i ta ostatnia okoliczność zmniejsza odpowiedzialność subiekta. Ponieważ subiekt rozpatrywanych konstrukcji przestaje być punktem wyjściowym w odpowiednim łańcuchu przy-

czynowo-skutkowym i nabiera cech beneficjenta, zmiana przypadku z mianownika na celownik okazuje się skutkiem ubocznym refleksywizacji. Tak znaczenie rozpatrywanych konstrukcji, jak też ich forma okazują się pochodne od znaczenia ogólnego morfemu *-sja*.

Słowa kluczowe:

język rosyjski, celownikowa konstrukcja zwrotna, wykładnik zwrotności, agentywność, pacjentywność, wolitywność, kompozycyjność

1. The problem

I will discuss Russian impersonal dative reflexive constructions (henceforth DRC) of the type of *Ivanu ploxu čitaetsja* ‘Ivan does not feel like reading’, lit. ‘to Ivan badly reads itself’. Only those cases are taken into account where this construction correlates with a personal one, as *Ivan čitaet* ‘Ivan reads’, since, as it will be clear below, the most prominent properties of DRC are due to its derivability from the personal construction.

DRC has been extensively discussed in the literature (cf. e.g., Wierzbicka 1981; Gerritsen 1990; Israeli 1997; Ackerman, Moore 2001; Pariser 1982, where the 19th century works are summarized), nevertheless it remains ill-understood. Thus, to the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made to render a *fully compositional* account of DRC. On the other hand, such an account is strongly preferable over a non-compositional one both in theoretical and practical terms, all the more so as the main properties of DRC are the same in many languages, such as Russian, Polish, German, Spanish, etc. Thus, it is tempting to explain the meaning of DRC as a direct result of the appearance of reflexive marker and the nominative-to-dative change in the case morphology of the subject.

It is generally agreed upon that DRC has two most prominent properties:

Property 1. The subject is less responsible for the action; in other words, its volitionality (and hence overall agentivity) is decreased (cf. e.g., Ackerman, Moore 2001: 141–157 and the references therein).¹

Property 2. The decrease of agentivity is due to the fact that some external and irrational force acts on the subject (cf. e.g., Wierzbicka 1981). According to Ackerman and Moore (2001: 152), “the subject is causally affected”. Unfortunately, they do not explain how exactly the subject is affected – although it is intuitively clear that the subject of DRC is influenced in some more or less *specific* way, i.e. the external force causes the subject to have – or not to have – the relevant desires and energy. An external force causing the subject to feel fear, to feel lonely, angry, etc., would not reduce the subject referent’s agentivity. Whether a robber makes me raise my hands or I raise my hands of my own free will, whether I beat someone in a fit of anger, or I do it in cold blood, in *grammatical* terms the level of my agentivity remains the same.

One might argue (and I do so in Zeldović 2011) that other properties of DRC (the subject is high in agentivity, normally human, hence the incoherence of *“Sobake*

¹ By the term ‘subject’ I understand the semantic subject of the action, not the grammatical one. Ackerman and Moore argue convincingly that at least in Russian and Polish (where DRC is quite similar) the dative argument in DRC is not a full-fledged grammatical subject.

ne begaetsja ‘the dog does not feel like running’; negation or a modifier such as *xorošo* ‘well’, *ploxo* ‘badly’ is needed in most cases, contrast ²²*Mne čitaetsja* ‘I feel like reading’ and *Mne ne čitaetsja*, *Mne ploxo čitaetsja* ‘I do not feel like reading’; perfective verbs are mostly avoided, etc., as discussed, among others, in Gerritsen 1990) are *derivative* from Properties 1–2. But what about these Properties themselves? Are the notions of low responsibility and external force *conventionally* linked with DRC, or derivative from the meaning of its minor ‘parts’? Why should some external force attenuate the control of the subject over the event?

My answer is this: there is a clear ‘compositional’ motivation behind the above-mentioned Properties. Property 1 is directly determined by the meaning of the reflexive marker and some additional circumstances to be presented later on, while Property 2 follows from Property 1 in a regular, even if not transparent way.

2. The meaning of the reflexive marker *-sja* in Russian: previous proposals

In the first place, let us consider the meaning of the Russian reflexive marker *-sja*.² Three claims are most popular in the literature, each of which is questionable.

Claim 1. The postfix *-sja* marks non-standard realization of arguments, e.g. the coreference of the agent and the patient in properly reflexive verbs (such as *myt’sja* ‘to wash (oneself)’); as far as the non-reflexive *myt’* is generally a two-place predicate, the reduction of one of its valencies is unordinary to some extent), the impossibility of the surface patient in the so-called aggressives (*Sobaka kusaetsja* ‘the dog bites’), the impossibility of the surface agent in decausatives (such as *Okno otkryvaetsja* ‘the window opens’), the degraded status of the agent in passive (the agent stops to be an actant, becoming syntactically optional); see Babby 1975; Babby 1983; cf. also Israeli 1997: 42–43.

One problem with this claim is that in many cases non-standard diathesis is *not* marked by *-sja*: cf. the so-called absolutive use of transitive verbs, as in *Ja gotovl’u* ‘I am cooking’, which is extremely productive in many languages. Such verbs are often highly agentive, referring to some creation (cooking, writing, painting), and hence the absence of the patient undoubtedly ‘breaks the law’, but still remains unmarked. Thus, what Babby actually means is not *any* non-standard way of argument realization but only *some* non-standard ways, and the questions of *which particular* ways and of *why* it is so remain unanswered.

Furthermore, while Claim 1 is primarily intended to explain the Russian data, in the view of intuitive similarity between ‘light’ reflexive markers across languages, an explanation covering all or nearly all of the cross-linguistic facts is strongly preferable. In many languages reflexive markers are employed in impersonal sentences of

² What I say below holds true for ‘light’ reflexive markers in many languages, for instance the Polish *się*, and Spanish *se*. Although the rules of their use slightly differ across languages, their meaning seems to be the same. This view is adopted by the majority of authors, see, e.g., Hopper, Thompson 1980; Arce-Arenales et al. 1994. For this reason, in the discussion below I will use some Polish and Spanish examples as additional (counter)evidence.

the kind of the Polish *Tam się jedzie przez most* 'One goes there by the bridge', *W ten sposób pisze się książki* 'This is the way books are written'. What does it follow from that in generic personal constructions such as *Tam jadą przez most* 'They go there by the bridge', *W ten sposób piszą książki* 'This is the way they write books', which also lack a syntactic subject, no reflexive marker is needed?

One might argue that in impersonal constructions it is not a mere absence, but *impossibility* of the subject which is specially marked, but how, then, should we explain the absence of the reflexive marker in many other impersonal constructions?

So, under Babby's approach the choice between reflexive and non-reflexive structure in the above discussed impersonal sentences remains unclear. On the other hand, this pattern is extremely productive in Polish, Spanish, Portuguese and many other languages, and thus Babby's claim misses a very important generalization.

Next, in many reflexive verbs one fails to find any deviation from, so to speak, diathetic standard altogether. For example, in such Russian 'colour attenuatives' as *belet'sja* 'to appear white', *temnet'sja* 'to appear dark'. The number of arguments is *not* reduced by *-sja*, cf. the non-reflexives *belet* 'to appear white', *temnet* 'to appear dark'.³ Comparable examples can be found in other languages (cf. e.g., Zeldovič 2011 for discussion of Spanish material).

Claim 2. In reflexive verbs the subject is conceived of both as the starting and the terminal point of the relevant causal chain, i.e. it is in some sense or other object-like (Gerritsen 1990; Arce-Arenales et al. 1994). For example, in reflexives of the *myt'sja* 'to wash (oneself)'-type the subject usually acts on himself, in passive it is by definition acted upon, and in aggressives it is the *object of characterization* (Gerritsen 1990: 99).

Still, this claim is also wrong for the above mentioned Polish, Spanish etc. impersonal reflexive constructions, as well as for many anti-causative verbs, such as *lit'sja* 'to pour', *vylivat'sja* 'to pour out', *otkryvat'sja* 'to open (by itself)', *zakryvat'sja* 'to shut (by itself)', *isparjat'sja* 'to evaporate', etc., where the subject is often acted upon by some external force, but may also be thought of as initiating the action *by itself*.

Claim 3. Reflexive forms mark reduced transitivity, i.e. the situation is, as it were, less identifiable, less accessible to our mind (Hopper, Thompson 1980).

Recall that in Hopper and Thompson's approach, transitivity is a manifold phenomenon. Transitivity is higher where (a) the utterance has at least two participants, agent and direct object (in this case, transmission of force from A to DO typically occurs, which is in most cases easy to observe); (b) the situation is dynamic rather than static; (c) the situation is telic; (d) the situation is punctual; (e) the agent is volitional; (f) the utterance is affirmative; (g) the modality is realis rather than irrealis; (h) the action is controllable; (i) the action affects the totality of the object; (j) the object is highly individuated, e.g., it is specific or definite.

Indeed, in many instances, including reflexives of the *myt'sja* 'to wash (oneself)'-type, the reflexive marker reduces the number of arguments, signals atelicity, as

³ For an analysis of subtle differences between such reflexives and non-reflexives see Gerritsen 1980: 40–42).

illustrated in Hopper, Thompson (1980: 278), stativizes the situation (recall constructions of the type of the Russian *Sobaka kusaetsja* 'the dog bites', which refer in the first place to a property, not to an action; as is well known, passive constructions in general, and reflexive passive in particular, tend to be more stative than their active counterparts), attenuates the role of the subject (in DRC, for that matter), de-individualizes the object to some extent (for instance, in the Russian *Sobaka kusaetsja* 'the dog beats' the object is generalized), or indicates that object is only partially affected (the so-called oblique reflexives, cf. Russian *vzjat'sja (za)* 'to grip (some part of the object)').

Still, in spite of its intuitive appeal, this solution also encounters problems.

First, there are cases where the reflexive marker hardly reduces the overall transitivity. Consider the formation of Russian reflexives of the *myt'sja* 'to wash (oneself)'-type (*X moe't Y(-a)* 'X washes Y' => *X moetsja* 'X washes (himself)'). While the number of arguments decreases here, object which can be animate or inanimate in *X moe't Y(-a)* becomes necessarily animate in *X moetsja*, i.e. the degree of its individuation is higher, hence by criterion (j) transitivity is also higher. As a result, the influence of the reflexive marker on the degree of transitivity is twofold here, and it would be unmotivated to speak of its reduction.

Second, there exist even more transparent examples where the degree of transitivity is higher in the reflexive, cf. the Spanish verbs *dormir* 'to sleep' and *dormirse* 'to fall asleep', *arder* 'to burn' and *arderse* 'to catch fire', where the reflexive predicate refers to an achievement, while the non-reflexive is stative, so that by criteria (b), (d) the former ones are more transitive.

Third, if the above mentioned ten criteria defining the degree of transitivity form a stable, non-accidental, and cross-linguistically recurrent set (which is the main tenet of the theory under discussion), one might expect at least some languages to use the reflexive marker also as a marker of counterfactuality and of negation (cf. criteria (g) and (f)). I am not aware of such a case.

3. The meaning of the reflexive marker -sja in Russian: a novel proposal

The claim that I want to advance here is that the meaning of reflexive markers can be captured in terms of Dowty's (1990) theory of agentive and patientive prototypes (cf. also Ackerman, Moore 2001).

In short, the reflexive marker signals that the highest ranked syntactic argument⁴ is less agent-like, and/or more patient-like than the subject in the corresponding non-reflexive.

The agent and patient prototypes have the following properties:

⁴ Usually it is the subject proper, i.e. the subject in the nominative form, but other forms are also possible, for example dative subjects in DRC.

- (1) Agent proto-role:
 - (a) A is volitional;
 - (b) A is a sentient being;
 - (c) A causes the event, most prominently causes changes in P;
 - (d) A moves (relative to some other participant);
 - (e) A exists independently of the situation referred to.
- (2) Patient proto-role:
 - (a) P undergoes changes;
 - (b) P is incremental theme (i.e. serves for 'measurement' of action);
 - (c) Some other participant causes changes in P;
 - (d) P does not move;
 - (e) P's existence depends on the situation.

For the purposes at hand, it would be useful to extend the Dowtyian model in two respects.

First, although Dowty's work focuses on transitive constructions, intransitive ones, including DRC, could well be treated in similar terms. All of the notions used in (1–2) are intuitively universal and hence *prima facie* must be important for intransitive predications as well.⁵

Second, Dowty assumes all of the relevant parameters to be binary, but at least one of them, namely volitionality, which will play a great role in forthcoming discussion, is certainly gradable, as also observed by Ackerman, Moore (2001).

My claim that the reflexive marker reduces agentivity and/or promotes patientivity is supported by the Russian reflexive verbs of the *myt'sja* 'to wash (oneself)'-type and others, in which the agent also becomes a patient, by anti-causatives (where the causer, which is always higher in agentivity, is eliminated, and the patient occupies its place), by passive reflexives (in which the object which is less agentive becomes a subject), by the 'reflexives of predisposition' (such as the Russian *bumaga rvetsja* 'the paper tears', where, as it were, the object, hence more patient-like participant, becomes the subject), by reciprocals (here the agent becomes also a patient to some extent; thus, if *Ivan celujuetsja s Mariej* 'Ivan and Mary kiss', Ivan is both the agent (the one who kisses), and the patient (the one kissed)), etc.

To take less obvious examples, consider *Sobaka kusaetsja* 'the dog bites', where the dog becomes an object of characterization, and thus also more patientive (Gerritsen 1990: 99).

In such instances as the Polish *Tam się jedzie przez most* 'One goes there by the bridge', *W ten sposób pisze się książki* 'This is the way books are written', no matter whether the subject disappears here or it is the reflexive marker *się* which is the subject (the opportunity hard to believe in), the subject loses its independent existence as compared to commensurable constructions with "ordinary", even if generic subjects.

⁵ Recall that there is no sharp divide between transitive and intransitive constructions, see e.g. Hopper, Thompson 1982.

The point is that generic *personal* sentences are *systematically polysemous* between a generic and a specific meaning. Thus, the Polish sentences *Tam jadą przez most* 'They go there by the bridge', *W ten sposób piszą książki* 'This is the way they write books', as well as the Spanish constructions *Aquí duerme la gente* 'They sleep here', lit. 'People sleep here', or the Russian *Spjat u nas na čerdake* 'In our house, they sleep in the attic', may refer to a *specific* group of people (say, the people living in such-and-such district, people belonging to such-and-such family, etc). This indicates that possible vacillation between strictly generic and non-generic construal is due to a *vagueness* of the meaning of relevant sentences, not to their *ambiguity*. That is to say, the genericity of the subject and hence the lack of independent existence thereof is a matter of context, not a regular property of such constructions.

On the other hand, for impersonal reflexive constructions under discussion the generic interpretation is the only possible one, which definitely deprives the subject of independent existence.⁶

One might argue that in impersonal constructions it is not a mere absence, but *impossibility* of the subject which is specially marked, but how, then, should we explain the absence of the reflexive marker in many other impersonal constructions?⁷

4. Why *-sja* in DRC reduces volitionality: general remarks

It follows from what has been said that the addition of the reflexive marker can reduce the agentivity of the subject, and that the relevant difference between the non-reflexive (NRC) and reflexive construction (RC) may be of six kinds:

- (a) in NRC volitionality is higher, in RC lower;
- (b) in NRC the event is volitional – in RC it is non-volitional, or its volitionality is optional;
- (c) in NRC the subject is sentient – in RC it is non-sentient, or its sentience is optional;
- (d) in NRC the subject is the causer of the event – in RC it is not necessarily so;
- (e) in NRC the subject moves – its movement is not implied by RC;
- (f) in NRC the existence of the subject is independent of the situation referred to – in RC it is or may be dependent.

If, however, we ask which of these options is pragmatically more accessible, it becomes immediately clear that it is the first one.

Indeed, it is only half-heartedly that we regard two situations as identical if one of them arises due to a volitional action of its subject, and the other does not (cf. ^{??}*John and Mary both broke a vase, John intentionally, Mary accidentally*; many authors even tend to treat such uses of a verb as distinct lexemes), and it is practically impossible to

⁶ True enough, sometimes such constructions are used with reference to a specific subject, but this is a stylistic device, a kind of ostentative avoidance of direct nomination; see Christensen 1995.

⁷ For extensive discussion of more complicated examples demonstrating that the reflexive marker signals reduced agentivity and/or increased patientivity of the subject, see Zeldovič 2011, Chapter II.2.

deem identical a situation where the subject *must* be sentient, and a situation where it need not be so; a situation where the subject necessarily causes the event, and a situation where it does not; a situation where the subject necessarily moves and a situation where its movement is unnecessary; a situation where the subject has its independent existence, and a situation where it has not.

On the other hand, as far as volitionality is a gradable phenomenon, an event for whose occurrence the subject is somewhat more responsible, and an event in which that participant's role in the event's taking place is lower can be readily regarded as the same type of action, as the following well-formed sentence illustrates: *John and Mary both washed their dishes; however, John did it reluctantly, Mary eagerly.*

Therefore, if option (a) is chosen, the *conceptual distance* between NRC and RC is shorter, hence where the reflexive marker is taken to signal the reduction of agentivity, it would most readily be interpreted as the marker of *lower volitionality*.⁸

Furthermore, one might argue that the most natural way to reduce volitionality in DRC is to conceive of the subject as owing its desires and resources to an external irrational force.

5. Why -sja in DRC reduces volitionality: specific remarks

To see this, let us first specify the notion of volitionality assumed here.

It is usually believed that action is volitional if it is due to free choice of the subject (cf. Ackerman, Moore 2001: 30).

Imagine, however, a situation where John is incapable of any physical action but capable of *wishing*, and someone else has immediate access to his wishes (e.g. telepathically) and fulfils them. Are we entitled to say in such circumstances that John built a house, sent a letter, etc.? The answer is no: beyond volition, some *deed* is needed: at the very least, John should have *said* something, or move his lips, or wink, etc. Hence, volitionality presupposes some *inner resources*.

In other words, *an action is volitional, where the following is true: if the agent acts, it is due to his free choice, and to the fact that he has requisite inner resources.*

Admittedly, the borderline between volitional and non-volitional situations is somewhat blurred. Consider such 'demi-volitional' verbs as *spat* 'to sleep', *zevat* 'to yawn', *čixat* 'to sneeze', *plakat* 'to cry', *vsplaknut* 'to cry (for a while, a little)', *toskovat* 'be in sorrow'. On the one hand, such situations are normally not due to the subject's choice, and hence, if we follow the Dowtyian style of thinking and take into account only those senses *necessarily* implied by the verb, such verbs would not be regarded as volitional.

On the other hand, we should somehow accommodate the intuition that in all of these cases the responsibility of the subject can be higher or lower, since sometimes

⁸ Note that I do not claim that such a reflexive marker *always* implies a lower volitionality, which is factually untrue (see again Zeldović 2011, Chapter II.2). What I mean here is that there must exist and must be 'easily accessible' a construction where the reflexive marker is interpreted as a marker of a lower volitionality – and this construction is DRC.

this participant can intentionally inhibit the situation. For instance, if John was put to sleep with the help of a strong sleeping pill, he is most certainly not responsible for his sleeping, but under normal circumstances one feeling sleepy *can* choose between sleeping and non-sleeping, one feeling like yawning or sneezing can at least try not to yawn or sneeze, etc.

This means that the volitionality of the verbs in question can be reduced practically in the same way as the volitionality of ‘full-fledged’ volitional verbs, which explains the free occurrence of demi-volitional verbs in DRC.

6. Why an irrational external force?

Now let us turn to the main issue: why should the reduction of volitionality in DRC be tantamount to the appearance of an irrational external force ‘providing’ the subject with its wishes and inner resources?

Generally speaking, once we assume that the subject of DRC is lower in volitionality, two possibilities are open.

First, the fact that our desires and resources are gradable could be exploited, and the decrease of volitionality could mean that the subject has less desire and/or inner resources necessary for the action to be performed.

Second, we can think of the desires and inner resources of the subject as if they were dependent on some external circumstances, i.e. as if their existence were caused by some irrational external force. As I will show later on, where we say that such a force exists, we strongly tend to conceive of the relevant situation as *realized* or at least *very probable*, i.e. in this case the subject loses much of its freedom.

Note that in the first case, the reflexive construction would differ from the corresponding non-reflexive one only in *quantitative* terms, and in the second case the difference would be of a *qualitative* nature.

However, the realization of the first possibility would lead to drastic inconsistencies, and for this reason it is the second one that must be realized in reflexive constructions reducing the volitionality of the subject.

As follows from what has been said, the acceptance of the first possibility is tantamount to the claim that in the opposition “reflexive construction reducing the volitionality of the subject (DRC) – the relevant non-reflexive construction” a quantitative, not a qualitative sense is grammaticalized. However, it is only *qualitative* senses that tend to grammaticalize.

Skipping the discussion of the grammatical categories for which this is obviously true (such as gender, tense, person, mood, voice), let us consider several less transparent examples.

Number. The difference between singular and plural is partly qualitative, since one entity is the necessary minimum for the relevant situation to obtain and to be thought of, while more than one is not necessary. In other words, thinking of a ‘singular’ thing is a necessary condition for the relevant conceptualization, whereas thinking of a set of things of the same kind is not. Obviously, the difference between necessary and non-necessary conditions is a qualitative one.

Even more importantly, it has been argued that our concepts of singularity and plurality are not in the least symmetrical, only one of them (most certainly plurality) having its own ‘substance’ and the other one (in all probability, that of singularity) being semantically ‘void’ (cf. Farkas, de Swart 2010 for discussion). Arguably, also the differences between singular and dual, as well as between dual and plural are qualitative.

Grammatical aspect. The opposition ‘perfective aspect – imperfective aspect’ in Russian⁹ turns out to be qualitative regardless of whether we adopt the popular interpretation of aspect as a means of indicating that the event is completed/not completed, link the aspectual choice to ‘inceptivity’ or lack thereof (in which case the qualitative nature of the distinction is evident), or treat aspect the way I advocate in Zeldovič 2002; Zeldovič 2011.

My claim is that the perfective aspect presents the situation as – in some sense or other – singular, while imperfective as iterative or at least potentially repeatable. As I said above, the distinction between ‘one’ and ‘many’ is qualitative. Furthermore, for reasons explained in the above-mentioned research, in the *realis* domain the perfective aspect practically never signals, as it were, ‘pure’, ‘unmixed’ singularity: for instance, in the past the sense ‘the presence or absence of the result is important at the time of speech’ usually arises, in the future perfective verbs attract attention to the situation which immediately follows the speech event, etc. In *irrealis contexts*, by contrast, perfective verbs tend to be neutral, but their imperfective counterparts systematically develop specific shades of meaning; e.g., the so-called ‘potential’ imperfectives, i.e. imperfectives referring to some potentiality additionally suggest that the possible action has indeed taken place at some time, or most probably at several different times (thus, while utterance *Ona svarit francuzskij sup* ‘she can cook a French soup’, literally ‘she will cook a French soup’, with the perfective *svarit* is appropriate, even if the person in question has *never* cooked this kind of soup previously, utterance *Ona varit francuzskij sup* ‘she can cook a French soup’, literally ‘she cooks a French soup’ always presupposes that this person did so, and most certainly many times).

Thus, the opposition between grammatical aspects cannot be captured in purely quantitative terms.

Case. It goes without saying that the key case oppositions, in the first place that between the nominative normally used for agents and the accusative normally referring to patients, are qualitative in the above defined sense: the agent is the initial, while the patient is non-initial point in the relevant causal chain (cf., a.o., Croft 1991).

It might well seem that the difference between the first object and the second object could be treated as quantitative, because the latter is undoubtedly *less affected* by the action: consider such much-discussed examples as *We loaded the hay on the truck*, *We loaded the truck with hay*. Still, as Dowty (1991) showed, it is the participant in the situation that has more of the above listed properties of the ‘ideal’ patient that becomes the direct object, while for indirect objecthood the participant with fewer

⁹ I confine myself to Russian, since the discussion of other aspectual systems would lead us very far astray.

properties is chosen. On the other hand, every property comprised by the prototype of the patient is uncontroversially qualitative in character.¹⁰

The same holds true of the opposition between the accusative direct object and genitive direct object in Russian negative sentences, which might appear as quantitative. If the accusative indicates that the object is in some sense *less* prominent (see Timberlake 1975; Klenin 1980, among many others), does it mean that it differs from the genitive only in terms of quantity? The answer is no, for the following reasons. First, the genitive occurs instead of the accusative, but the accusative in itself is not in the least marked for prominence. On the one hand, intuitively it is not marked in positive sentences, and the analysis of negative ones is welcome, which keeps these types symmetrical. On the other hand, in the general case the accusative object may well be used both for high- and low-prominent participants. In spite of what many authors write, such an object can be both referentially definite and indefinite; cf. *Ja ne uvidel noviznu etoj raboty – nikakoj novizny tam net* 'I failed to see the novelty_{acc.} of the work – there is no novelty to it'; *Nikakuju knigu ja na stole ne videl: v komnate voobšče net knig* 'I saw no book_{acc.} on the desk: there are no books in the room'. True enough, accusative objects *tend* to be definite, or at least to be used with reference to already mentioned entities, but this tendency is explainable by division of labor between accusative object and genitive object, which always signals that its referent is less salient, and hence in all probability indefinite and not previously mentioned. Thus, here the relation between the two cases is asymmetric: only the genitive conveys some specific information concerning the salience of the relevant entity.

Second, as A. Timberlake convincingly argues, the genitive marking of the direct object is determined by several undoubtedly 'qualitative' factors, such as indefiniteness, plurality, inanimacy, lack of modification, etc.¹¹

It follows from the discussion so far that even seemingly strong candidates for 'quantitative' grammatical oppositions on closer inspection prove to be (at least partly) qualitative.

Against this background, the claim that dative reflexive constructions signal only that the subject's desires and/or inner resources are reduced is counterintuitive. Furthermore, if we accept this claim, another inconsistency that is hard to overcome arises. Recall that the meaning we ascribe to DRC is 'the subject has relatively *little* desire and/or inner resources'. However, the notion 'little' is always rhematic (Zeldovič 1999). To see this, consider the example in (3):

- (3) *Ja verju (dumaju, nadejus'), čto v čajnike malo vody*
'I believe (think, hope), there is little water in the kettle',

where it is the *small* quantity of water that becomes the object of belief or hope.

¹⁰ Things do not change if we opt for some other view of argument realization. Thus, according to Croft (1991), the subject and the direct object differ from other participants in that they serve for identification of the situation. Thus, the difference between the direct object and the indirect object once again turns out to be qualitative.

¹¹ A very similar picture is to be found in Russian genitive subjects, see Zeldovič 2011.

If this sense in DRC is rhematic, the negation of DRC would mean that the subject has *not little* desire and/or inner resources, which contradicts the very nature of DRC, whose basic meaning – whatever the concrete explanation of its origin – is uncontroversially the *reduction* of volitionality.

Our third counterargument is as follows.

Recall demi-volitional verbs, such as *spat* ‘to sleep’, *zevat* ‘to yawn’, *čixat* ‘to sneeze’, *plakat* ‘to cry’, *vsplaknut* ‘to cry (for a while, a little)’, *toskovat* ‘be in sorrow’. The eventualities they refer to may be completely independent of the subject’s choice (*Spal i ne mog prosnut’sja* ‘He slept and could not wake up’), or may to some extent be dependent on the subject’s choice, as when the subject can prevent the situation, but for some reasons chooses not to do so.

The point is that demi-volitional verbs are freely used in DRCs: DRCs signal the ‘helplessness’ of the subject, while corresponding personal constructions leave it unspecified whether the subject was helpless, or willingly refrained from taking any action. Note that in the pairs in (4)–(5) the indication of the freedom of will of the subject is in place only when the non-reflexive construction is involved:

- (4) a. Ona gor’ko plakala. I ne xotela ostanovit’sja.
‘She cried bitterly. And she did not wish to stop’
- b. ^{??}Ej gor’ko plakalos’. I ona ne xotela ostanovit’sja.
‘She felt like crying bitterly. And she did not wish to stop’.
- (5) a. On toskoval i toskoval. Mog sbrosit’ s sebja tosku, no ne xotel.
‘He was in sorrow. He could shed his sorrows, but he would not.’
- b. ^{??}Emu toskovalos’ i toskovalos’. Mog sbrosit’ s sebja tosku, no ne xotel.
‘He felt like being in sorrow. He could shed his sorrows, but he would not’.

Therefore, on the one hand, where demi-volitional verbs show up in DRC, the clearly qualitative change: ‘the subject could prevent the action – the subject could not’ occurs. Still, the fact that demi-volitional verbs are freely used in DRC and that, intuitively, this change is not different from what happens to ‘normal’ volitional verbs in DRC, also suggest that the reduction of volitionality in DRC is always due to some *qualitative* shift.

7. If the shift in the degree of volitionality in DRC as compared to personal constructions is a qualitative one, what is this shift and how is it triggered?

Recall that *an event is volitional, when the following is true: if the agent acts, it is due to his free choice, and to the fact that he has requisite inner resources*. Therefore, if volitionality is some sort of causal relation, and DRC serves to modify this relation (as compared to the corresponding non-reflexive construction), it might be expected that, in general, the employment of DRC makes the causal relations into which the relevant situation enters more salient, more interesting to the speaker. Thus, abstractly speaking, it may

well be that the reduction of volitionality occurs due to some restructurization or reinterpretation of relevant causal chains. I think, this is actually the case.

Let us start with the most obvious. First, every situation, among others the situations ‘the subject wishes to do something’, ‘the subject has inner resources for doing so’ has its cause. Second, this cause can be known to the speaker, and can be unknown to him.

What sets our desires and inner resources apart from the most of other things is that *their cause is hard to establish*.

If we speak of some concrete, ‘palpable’ event, there seems to be nothing special about saying that we know, or understand its cause.

Note the following facts. First, both saying that we know/understand the cause and saying that we do not know/understand it sounds here equally natural. Second, saying that we know, or understand the cause of some event, we mean *exactly what we say* – that we are in possession of some *knowledge*. Third, – and this is undoubtedly a consequence of the previous circumstance – this sort of knowledge is *easy to impart*.

Thus, in examples (6)–(8) the “positive” variant (a) sounds no less natural than the “negative” (b), and it is *knowledge* in the strict sense of the word that is involved both in (a) and (b). As versions (c) demonstrate, it could readily be imparted, and from versions (d) it is immediately clear that the impossibility of imparting such a knowledge is practically unthinkable.

- (6) a. Mne ponjatno, počemu Ivan uvolilsja.
‘It is clear to me why Ivan gave up his work’
b. Mne neponjatno, počemu Ivan uvolilsja
‘It is unclear to me why Ivan gave up his work’
c. Mne ponjatno, počemu Ivan uvolilsja, i ja mogu vam ob’jasnit’.
‘It is clear to me why Ivan gave up his work, and I can explain it to you’
d. ^{??}Mne ponjatno, počemu Ivan uvolilsja, no ja ne mogu vam xorošo ob’jasnit’
‘It is clear to me why Ivan gave up his work, but I cannot explain it well to you’
- (7) a. Mne jasno, počemu Ivan eto napisal.
‘It is clear to me why Ivan wrote that’
b. Mne nejasno, počemu Ivan eto napisal.
‘It is unclear to me why Ivan wrote that’
c. Mne jasno, počemu Ivan eto napisal, i ja mogu vam rasskazat’.
‘It is clear to me why Ivan wrote that, and I can tell you’
d. ^{??}Mne jasno, počemu Ivan eto napisal, no slovami etogo ne skazat’.
‘It is clear to me why Ivan wrote that, but one cannot tell it in words’
- (8) a. – Ty znaeš, počemu on ušel ot ženy?
‘Do you know why he left his wife?’
– Otlično znaju.
‘I know perfectly well’
b. – Ty znaeš, počemu on ušel ot ženy?
‘Do you know why he left his wife?’

- Ponjatija ne imeju.
 ‘I have no idea’
- c. Ja otično znaju, počemu on ušel ot ženy, i mogu vam ob’jasnit’
 ‘I know perfectly well why he left his wife, and I can explain it to you’
- d. ?Ja otično znaju, počemu on ušel ot ženy, no etogo ne ob’jasnit’ slovami.
 ‘I know perfectly well why he left his wife, but it cannot be explained in words’

On the other hand, when we say we know/understand why someone has such and such desires or inner resources, our utterance becomes distinctly marked. First, it is slightly more natural to say we *do not* know or understand the reason than to assert that we *know* or *understand* it. Thus, in examples (9)–(11) below the “positive” variant (a) is a bit less likely to appear in our everyday speech than the “negative” (b).

- (9) a. Mne vpolne ponjatno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily, čtoby) pisat’ knigu.
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (necessary energy) to write the book comes from’
- b. Mne sovsem neponjatno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily, čtoby) pisat’ knigu.
 ‘It is absolutely unclear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to write the book comes from’
- c. ?Mne vpolne ponjatno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily, čtoby) pisat’ knigu, i ja mogu vam eto ob’jasnit’
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to write the book comes from, and I can explain it to you’
- d. ?Mne vpolne ponjatno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily, čtoby) pisat’ knigu, no eto slovami ne ob’jasnit’
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to write the book comes from, but it cannot be explained in words’
- (10) a. Mne jasno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily) dumat’ o rabote
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to think of his work comes from’
- b. Mne nejasno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily) dumat’ o rabote
 ‘It is unclear to me where Ivan’s desire (necessary energy) to think of his work comes from’
- c. ?Mne jasno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily) dumat’ o rabote, i ja mogu vam ob etom rasskazat’
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to think of his work comes from, and I can tell you about that’
- d. ?Mne jasno, otkuda u Ivana želanie (sily) dumat’ o rabote, no takie vešči slovami inogda ne ob’jasnit’
 ‘It is clear to me where Ivan’s desire (energy necessary) to think of his work comes from, but sometimes you could not explain such things in words’

- (11) a. – Ty znaeš', gde Ivan vzjal sily, čtoby ujtí ot ženy?
 'Do you know what encouraged Ivan to leave his wife?'
 – Otlíčno znaju
 'I know it perfectly well'
- b. – Ty znaeš', gde Ivan vzjal sily, čtoby ujtí ot ženy?
 'Do you know what encouraged Ivan to leave his wife?'
 – Ponjatija ne imeju
 'I have no idea'
- c. – Ty znaeš', gde Ivan vzjal sily, čtoby ujtí ot ženy?
 'Do you know what encouraged Ivan to leave his wife?'
 – 'Otlíčno znaju – i mogu vam eto ob'jasnit'
 'I know perfectly well, and I can explain it to you'
- d. – Ty znaeš', gde Ivan vzjal sily, čtoby ujtí ot ženy?
 'Do you know what encouraged Ivan to leave his wife?'
 – 'Otlíčno znaju, no edva li smogu vam eto ob'jasnit'
 'I know perfectly well, but I could hardly explain it to you'

Even more crucial is the fact that while in negative utterances, speaking about the lack of knowledge/understanding, we indeed mean lack thereof, in the positive ones such expressions as *I know*, *I understand* on closer inspection turn out to be near synonyms to *I guess*, *I feel*, *I have such and such impressions*, etc. For instance, saying something like *I know/understand the source of John's inspiration: he has fallen in love* we more often than not refer to some kind of *partial* understanding, or even to mere guesswork. Thus, it is most certainly some impressions, not knowledge as such that are involved in (9a)–(11a). On the other hand, what the “negative” utterances (9b)–(11b) tell us about is uncontroversially not impressions, but *the lack of knowledge*.

To sum up, here in the negative variants words mean exactly what they mean, or at the very least are much closer to their canonical, literal meaning than in the positive variants – *which is indicative of their marked nature*.

Last but not least, as the slightly bizarre examples (9c)–(11c) and, conversely, the impeccable examples (9d)–(11d) show, the mental attitude referred to in (9a)–(11a) is often hard to impart, which is unnatural in the case of actual knowledge. This fact lends additional support to the claim that it is not knowledge or understanding as such that we face in (9a)–(11a) and that such constructions are marked and, hence, *pragmatically less accessible* than their negative counterparts.

It should also be noted that regardless the detail with which we present the rational, obvious reasons why someone would and could do something, there always remains room for some additional ununderstood causes. Thus, (12) is almost contradictory:

- (12) Ivanu tak xočetsja pisat' potomu, čto davno ne pisal, i potomu, čto u nego sozrevaet novyj zamysel. ^{??}Vpročem, nel'zja skazat', čto želanie voznikaet u Ivana takže pod vozdejstviem kakoj-to nejasnoj postoronnej sily

‘Ivan feels like writing so much because he has not written since a long time ago and because he has a new idea that is beginning to take shape.’^{??} However, it is not true that Ivan’s desire arises because some unclear external force acts upon him’.

To sum up, whenever we look for the source of the subject’s desires and inner resources, the idea that the speaker fails to recognize this source is pragmatically more salient and more readily available than the opposite, i.e. that the speaker knows this source. Thus, when interpreting dative reflexive constructions *we are ready* to think that the subject has his desires and inner resources because *he is acted upon by some external irrational force*. What is more, if we think this way, *the volitionality of the subject is automatically reduced*.

To see this, consider first the following examples:

- (13) a. Volnenie pobuždalo Ivana pisat’, no on ne naxodil nužnyx slov
‘Agitation made Ivan write, but he failed to choose the right words’
b. ^{??}Neponjatnaja sila pobuždala Ivana pisat’, no on ne naxodil nužnyx slov
‘An unknown force made Ivan write, but he failed to choose the right words’
- (14) a. Posle dolgogo otpuska Ivanu hotelos’ rabotat’, no rabotat’ emu zapretili
‘After the long vacation Ivan was eager to work, but he had no permission to work’
b. ^{??}Nejasnaja sila vlekla Ivana k rabote, no rabotat’ emu zapretili
‘Some unclear force pushed Ivan to work, but he had no permission to work’
- (15) a. Posle otpuska u Ivana pojavilis’ sily pisat’, no on rešil zanjat’sja drugimi delami
‘After the vacations Ivan had the energy for writing, but he chose to do other things’
b. ^{??}Neizvestno otkuda u Ivana pojavilis’ sily pisat’, no on rešil zanjat’sja drugimi delami
‘For some unknown reason, Ivan had the energy for writing, but he chose to do other things’
- (16) a. Ot vodki vdrug pojavilsja kuraž, no ne bylo vozmožnosti dat’ emu vyxod
‘After drinking vodka, he felt brave, but there was no outlet for his energy’
b. ^{??}Neizvestno otkuda pojavilsja kuraž, no ne bylo vozmožnosti dat’ emu vyxod
‘Out of nowhere, a courage appeared, but there was no outlet for his energy’

From examples (b) it appears that speaking of unclear source of the energy and desire is fine, only where *the relevant action is actually (at least partly) performed, not merely intended*.

In other words, once we employ some special construction indicating that the subject's desires and/or inner resources are due to an irrational external force, we limit the subject's free will, we reduce his responsibility and hence his volitionality.¹²

The same holds true of demi-volitional verbs, i.e. verbs referring to a situation which arises 'by itself' and not due to the subject's intention, but which, in principle, could be *prevented* by the subject: *spat* 'to sleep', *zevat* 'to yawn', *čixat* 'to sneeze', *plakat* 'to cry', *vsplaknut* 'to cry (for a while, a little)', *toskovat* 'be in sorrow', etc.

If we conceive of the subject as being acted upon by some irrational external force, it is harder to believe that the subject could (intentionally) refrain from the relevant action.

As for the pragmatic accessibility of such a notion, it is even higher than in the case of 'ordinary', full-fledged agentive verbs, since what is unclear here is not why the subject *has* some intentions and/or inner resources but why he *does not* have the intention and/or resources necessary for preventing some action, and since the reasons for the lack of something tend to be unknown more strongly than the reasons for its presence.

Examples (17)–(19) below show that it is natural not to see the reason for someone's crying, being in sorrow, etc., and examples (20)–(22) show how uncomfortably we feel when someone claims to understand the reasons:

- (17) Ty znaeš', otčego ona grustit (plačet), kogda nado radovat'sja?
'Do you know why she is in sorrow (is crying), when she should be happy?'
– Ponjatija ne imeju
'I have no idea'
- (18) – Ty znaeš', otčego on spit, kogda emu na rabotu?
'Do you know, why he is sleeping, when he should go to work?'
– Ne znaju
'I do not know'
- (19) – Ty znaeš', otčego on podumal, čto ja ego obman'yaju?
'Do you know, why he thought I was deceiving him?'
– Ponjatija ne imeju
'I have no idea'
- (20) – Ty znaeš', otčego ona grustit (plačet), kogda nado radovat'sja?
'Do you know why she is in sorrow (is crying), when she should be happy?'
– ?Da, točno znaju
'Yes, I know exactly'

¹² Admittedly, this happens on the level of our conceptualization, but this is exactly the level where such phenomena as agentivity and patientivity belong. Recall such well-known examples as *John helped me very much with his letter*, *John's letter helped me very much*, where, factually, John is in both cases an agent, but linguistically only in the former one he is agentive. Russian *Kon' umer ot starosti* 'the horse died from age', *Starost' ubila konja* 'the age killed the horse' are of the same type: in the long run, *kon'* 'the horse' is patient-like in both cases, but while in the latter it is overtly marked for patientivity, in the former it seems to be an actor, the participant in some way or other *responsible* for what happened.

- (21) – Ty znaeš, o čěgo on spit, kogda emu na rabotu?
 ‘Do you know, why he is sleeping, when he should go to work?’
 – ??Da, točno znaju
 ‘Yes, I know exactly’
- (22) – Ty znaeš, o čěgo on podumal, čto ja ego obmanyvaju?
 ‘Do you know, why he thought I was deceiving him?’
 – ??Da, točno znaju
 ‘Yes, I know exactly’

From what has been said it is immediately clear why the subject of DRC with demivolitional verbs is completely ‘helpless’, as examples (4)–(5) repeated below for convenience show:

- (4) a. Ona gor’ko plakala. I ne xotela ostanovit’sja.
 ‘She cried bitterly. And she did not wish to stop’
 b. ??Ej gor’ko plakalos’. I ona ne xotela ostanovit’sja.
 ‘She felt like crying bitterly. And she did not wish to stop.’
- (5) a. On toskoval i toskoval. Mog sbrosit’ s sebja tosku, no ne xotel.
 ‘He was in sorrow. He could shed his sorrows, but he would not.’
 b. ??Emu toskovalos’ i toskovalos’. Mog sbrosit’ s sebja tosku, no ne xotel.
 ‘He felt like being in sorrow. He could shed his sorrows, but he would not’.

8. Why dative subject?

Now the last question remains: why a shift from nominative to dative case occurs in DRC?

The answer is quite straightforward. According to Croft (1991) and other works, we tend to use nominative case for the participant being the initial point of the relevant causal chain. However, in DRC the subject is *not* the initial point: this role is served by an irrational external force, the subject being rather some kind of *benefactive*, and thus the most appropriate case is dative.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, if we agree that the reflexive postfix *-sja* is an indicator of relatively low agentivity and/or high patientivity, one of its interpretation is ‘the subject is less volitional’, which is most readily construed as ‘the subject is acted upon by an irrational external force’, which leads to nominative-to-dative change of the subject’s morphological marking.

Thus, the most prominent properties of dative reflexive constructions can be explained in a compositional way, which helps to reduce the number of grammatical entities and makes it clear why dative reflexive constructions are so similar across languages.¹³

¹³ For explanation of ‘secondary’ properties of DRC see Zeldovič 2011.

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